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The Intellectual Bombthrowers

How the Institute for Policy Studies Tries to Remain Existentially Pragmatic While Subverting the Establishment

By Stephen Clapp

"IF THIS WERE 1773, and the city were Boston, the Institute would be holding a seminar on British imperialism. There would be tables and charts to show the injustice of the tax on tea. Probably somebody from the Governor's office would be invited. Then, independent of the Institute, six or seven of the fellows would go out and dump a shipload of tea into Boston Harbor."

Speaking is Karl Hess, one-time Barry Goldwater speechwriter turned "radical libertarian." The Institute is the Institute for Policy Studies, 1520 New Hampshire Avenue; the fellows there consider themselves the most important political science faculty in the nation. Hess, who led a seminar on the Old Right and the New Left as an associate fellow, sees his colleagues as the Thomas Jeffersons and Sam Adamses of the Second American Revolution.

"I didn't know what a radical was until I came to the Institute," Hess says. "I now find it's the sort of person Barry Goldwater used to be. I've always admired Goldwater personally, and I wish he could attend some of the seminars. He would like the ideas on neighborhood government; they are the active embodiment of his political principles. He might even modify his views on imperialism."

Many Washingtonians have heard of the Institute for Policy Studies, but few know just what it is or what it does. The reader may know that Marcus Raskin, a co-director, was indicted and acquitted in the celebrated Boston anti-draft conspiracy case; or that Arthur Waskow, one of the Institute's most active fellows, led a "Freedom Seder" in April on the anniversary of the 1968 District riots. Many times I had walked past the Institute's four-story town house near Dupont Circle and seen blacks in dashikis and students in Movement denims lounging on the steps. This fall, after having written a long critique of local universities ["Will Our Universities Hang Separately?" July 1969 WASHINGTONIAN], I decided to find out what makes the Institute the obviously exciting place it is.

It is impossible to understand the Institute without knowing its history.

The half-dozen young men who conceived the idea of an independent research organization were bright young government aides and scholars in the Kennedy years. Schooled at the nation's most prestigious universities and graced with abundant professional opportunities, they were nonetheless frustrated and unhappy. Despite successful careers, they felt they were working on trivial matters. The really important issues--if confronted at all—were the province of researchers at universities and government-sponsored think-tanks. Early in their planning, the founders decided that their institute would accept no government contracts or consultant fees, thus preserving the integrity of the Institute's primary mission: independent research.

"We were convinced that the problems of America were not technical or managerial, but moral," says Raskin. "To have a truly meaningful discussion of those problems it was necessary for us to get out of the hierarchical structures that were shaping our intellectual approach. We were very critical of 'objective knowledge,' realizing that much of what we had been taught contained hidden ideology and propaganda."

Waskow is more blunt.

"Everyone assured us that we had received wonderful educations. In fact, they were terrible. Experience taught us to remake all our conceptions of society. We saw that the country was on the road to destruction, yet nobody was paying any attention. The big questions were all being studied by people on contract to the government. What we suspected in 1963 has become a gut-felt reality now. Government is incapable of studying its problems honestly."

Before founding the Institute, Raskin had been legislative counsel to a group of liberal Congressmen and a member of the special staff of the National Security Council. Waskow had been a legislative assistant and a senior staff member of the Peace Research Institute.

The other founders were:

Richard J. Barnet, who had worked for the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. After becoming co-director of the Institute, he wrote two major books, *Intervention and Revolution* and the recently published *The Economy of Death*.

Robb Burlage, who had served as research director for the Planning Office of the State of Tennessee. Since becoming a fellow, he has undertaken a study of urban health problems and analyzed the use of resources in Appalachia.

Christopher S. Jencks, who had written on education and poverty issues for *The New Republic* and other magazines. With David Riesman, he published *The Academic Revolution*, a study of higher education. Jencks is presently directing an allied institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Milton Kotler, who was a lecturer at the Urban Training Center for Christian Missions in Chicago before joining the Institute. He was instrumental in founding a community corporation in a Columbus, Ohio, ghetto neighborhood. His recently published book, *Neighborhood Government*, grew out of that experience.

Donald N. Michael, who was a senior staff member of the Brookings Institution. He joined the Institute to study the political impact of technological change; he is now at the University of Michigan.

For the Institute's founders, it was not enough to leave their jobs for an ivory tower where they could think Great Thoughts. They felt they could gain fresh insights only by becoming directly involved in social change. By bridging the gap between involvement and detachment, they might be able to enliven their research and have greater impact on policy.

Practically, this commitment to action has involved the Institute in an array of projects and social experiments, some successful and some not.

Intellectually, it has led the fellows to subscribe to a philosophy of "existential pragmatism," which Raskin discusses in a forthcoming book, *Being and Doing*. Pragmatism is a favorite word of conservatives, who use it to justify acquiescence in existing power arrangements and cooperation with elites. Raskin argues that power arrangements historically lose their utility and become unjust and absurd. It is the social scientist's duty to perceive irrationality and to bring about alternatives. Crucial to perceiving irrationality, however, is the existential willingness to identify with the oppressed and powerless. In *Being and Doing*, Raskin notes that social thinkers have traditionally "stood off" from their subjects

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